

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Co-worker Full of Hot Air

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) Note: The entire column below is unclassified.



Hey Zelda,

What do I do about an employee who sits close by and runs a space heater all day? I sit by the window (presumably a cooler place) and I'm just fine... or I should say was just fine. Now I'm hot, this is wasting energy, I believe it violates Agency policy and the person has a could-not-care-less attitude about others. Management ignores it... What to do?

-- Sweating it out in SID

Dear Sweaty,

What an excellent topic! I have experienced this at all times of year, not just in winter. It's hard to share communal work spaces when everyone wants to customize their environment to their liking. I sympathize with your plight.

You are correct -- according to ME6 guidance¹, personally-owned space heaters are not allowed in Agency spaces. There are a few circumstances under which an employee may be issued a space heater², but employees may not bring their own heaters into the building.

You might want to draw your supervisor's attention to the document "Safety Program for General Appliances" (see footnote 1), which outlines responsibilities for both employees and supervisors. The bottom line is that employees are not to use an appliance without permission from their supervisor; and the supervisor must receive approval from the Power, Space and Cooling Triage Team before the item is plugged in.

If your co-worker has a legitimate health reason to be issued an Agency-approved space heater, then there's not much you can do. This problem, as well as the solution, is age old -- ask any married couple where one likes to sleep with the window open and the other is bundled under the covers. Both sides need to compromise.

Here are a few suggestions for you and your thermally-challenged co-worker.

When you're hot

- If there is an empty desk, farther away from the heater, request a move.
- Wear layers in the office -- a jacket or sweater that you can remove when things heat up.
- Drink cold beverages instead of coffee, tea, or soup.

When you're not

- Are you cold all the time? Wear warmer fabrics or layers to hold in the heat. Men -- add a pullover sweater ("jumper," for you integrees) or sweater vest (no, they're not just for Glee Club geeks) over your dress shirt and tie. Ladies -- tights instead of pantyhose, boots instead of pumps, turtlenecks instead of V-necks, and longer skirts will help keep you warm. You don't have to sacrifice fashion. Invest in a pretty pashmina. Keep a wrap or sweater on the back of your chair to throw over your shoulders or legs when you feel the chill.
- If you run a space heater, aim the hot air away from your co-workers, focused on your cubicle or corner and not blowing into communal areas. If possible, rearrange your work space so there is a barrier (white board? coat rack? boxes?) containing the heat around you, rather than letting it escape into the rest of the room (as long as this does not create a fire hazard).
- Switch to hot tea instead of iced tea or soda. It will warm your hands as well as your insides.
- Get up and move around. Take a break once an hour with a short walk (around the room or down the hall) to get the blood pumping.
- Be considerate and energy conscious. Turn off the heater when you leave your desk to go to lunch, a meeting, etc.

If you are using an unauthorized space heater, understand the ramifications of your actions. Not only are you using up extra energy (space heaters are much less efficient than the Agency's HVAC system), but you could be throwing the room's thermostat out of whack -- causing the air conditioning to kick in! Be a good neighbor - it's just as uncomfortable to be hot as to be cold. Keep in mind that the ambient temperature has been selected by the facilities staff because it has been deemed optimal for a number of reasons.

One last word to Sweaty: if it turns out your co-worker has an approved space heater, is her birthday coming up? Chip in with others to give her a "**Snuggie**." 😊 And no, please don't get your own fan and blow her hot air back at her. That won't help our power, space and cooling problem.

You **do** have the ability to regulate your own temperature to a certain degree, whether you adjust your clothing or build a wall of boxes insulating you from your cold colleague. With any luck, your office will be due for a reorg shortly, and you'll be sitting next to someone else.

Warmly,*

Edda

* pun intended

(U) Footnotes:

1. New guidelines addressing this issue can be found on the Environmental Safety & Health Solutions web site. Type "**go me6**" and click on "A" in the alphabet section. The document is under Appliance Safety.

2. If your work center's temperature is outside of the acceptable range for office space (approx. 70-74 degrees Fahrenheit), a space heater may be issued to you by the Facilities staff until the problem can be fixed. All other requests should go to the Disability Affairs office. [end of column]
